

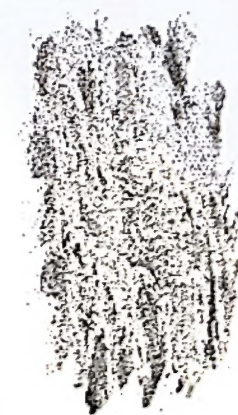


A day in the life of a voyageur

Mes amis! How about coming on a journey with me? Are you surefooted, strong-backed, and fun loving? Good voyageurs were all of these things. As a voyageur, you also had to be a skilled navigator and have a curious, risk-taking nature. We were brave but, at the same time, respectful of nature's power in the wild frontier. At the beginning of our trips on the Great Lakes we would throw little trinkets into the waters out of respect for the power of nature. Tobacco, beads, or brass buttons were offered to Old Lady Wind, known as **La Vielle**, as we asked for safe passage. Many canoes, their cargo, and their crew have been lost to sudden storms. We all hoped for a safe journey.

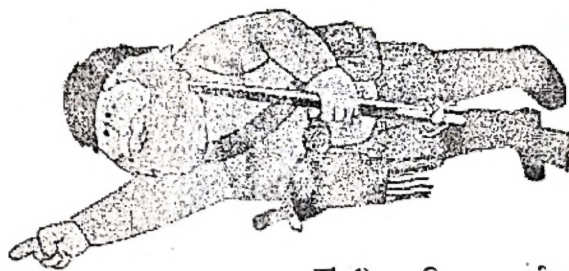
Like today's hockey and football players dressed in team uniforms, we voyageurs had our own way to dress. We wore our buckskin pants and blue tunics belted at the waist with the hand-woven wool **ceinture fléchée**, or sash. A red woollen toque is what we wore on our heads to maintain body heat in the cold weather and keep pesky bugs out of our hair in spring and summer. The **ceinture fléchée** worn at our waists had many uses. It was warm, it could act as a rope or a tumpline, and if treated with beeswax it could be a waterproof cup. Furthermore, each **ceinture fléchée** was designed and made by the voyageurs themselves. This was our trademark uniform. Additionally, we each had our own paddle covered in hand carved designs. These designs, like the designs in the **ceinture fléchée**, could give you an idea of which area in New France we came from.

I came to this colony, known as New France, having traveled by sea from the country of France in Europe. I make good money as a voyageur. I learned quickly about the First Nation tribes and their unique cultures and languages. There are many challenges that I shared in this wild rugged country with other voyageurs, the **coureurs de bois**, First Nation tribes, and the English, Scottish and French explorers. Co-operating, we created new trails in the wilderness that lead to all corners of this new land called Canada.



I am from Trois Rivières, and work for a Montreal trading company. In the late 1700's, over 54 percent of the male population of Trois Rivières was, or had been, a voyageur.

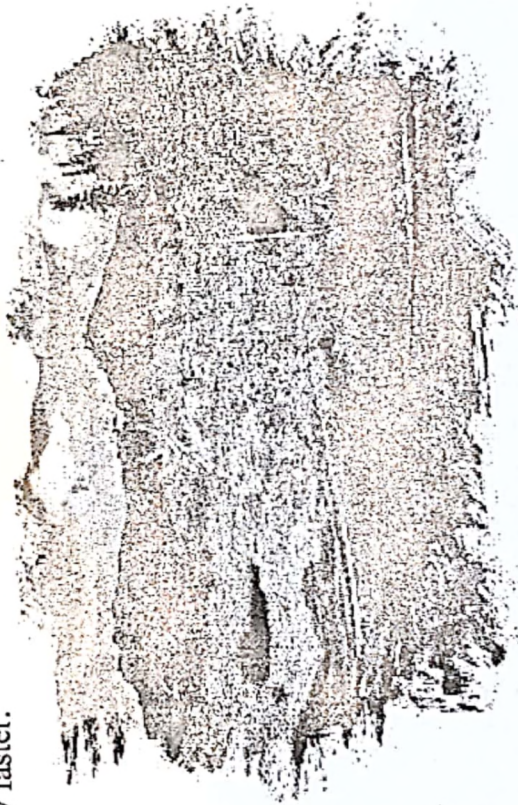
My brigade of canoes is on its way to Fort Chipewyan, up by Lake Athabasca in Northern Saskatchewan. The beaver furs from the north region are very valuable because they are so thick and soft. We will be trading with the Chipewyan and Beaver native tribes. Some **coureurs de bois** will also be there to trade their bartered furs from the northern native settlements. We will be gone for many months before we return to Montreal. Most of my fellow voyageurs are either young single men from France or were born in New France. Being a voyageur is an honourable job for me and the other men of my brigade. We are from families of craftsmen, military background, and farmers. The **coureurs de bois**, on the other hand, are mostly young jobless men who were either soldiers or hired men. One thing is for sure: we enjoy the adventure and love the



money we can make off this new frontier. It is not an easy life, but it is the life for me.

I am twenty-four years old. The other voyageurs in my crew are about the same age. One of the paddlers, Michel, is thirty-seven. He has been a voyageur for most of his life. Because he is the most experienced, he is the one who explains things to the newest voyageurs. I learned most of my survival skills from Michel. He learned most of his skills from the natives. Michel often reminds everyone that very soon he will be leaving the rivers and trading to start a small farm with his wife Claudette and their six children. Our employers have sold him a small piece of land near Georgian Bay in return for his many years of dedication. Although he never says it, I can tell that he is finding it difficult to keep up with us on these hard journeys. When he does leave, we will miss his attitude about river life, his songs, and his famously grand stories. All voyageurs brag about how strong they are, but the hard work takes its toll on our bodies. We retire young from the rivers.

Our days are long. Most days, we work for 18 hours! That is a lot of paddling and portaging. Every hour, we are allowed ten minutes to rest. Even the strongest men's arms get very tired after the hard work of paddling. Sometimes while we are paddling, the crew will sing songs of our adventures, to help the day speed by faster.

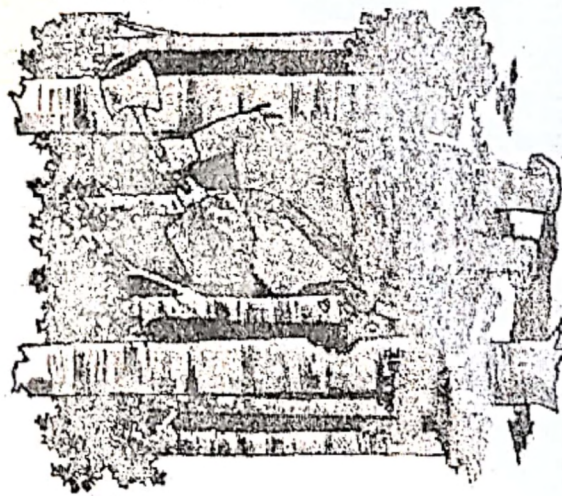


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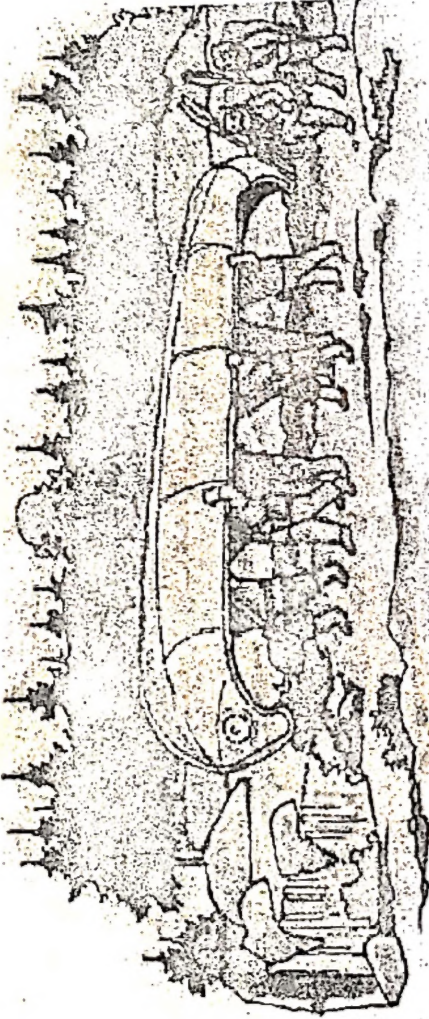
A day in the life of a voyageur



We awake before sunrise. One of us stirs up the embers of the fire and adds wood to help us warm up after sleeping all night on the cold, hard ground. We eat a very quick breakfast of maize mush or salt pork then get to work. The canoes that spent the previous night upside-down need to be righted and repacked with cargo. At night, the overturned canoes provide us with shelter from heavy dew and nasty weather. We must be very careful when we load the canoes to make sure that the cargo's weight is evenly distributed for easy handling on the rushing rivers.

As we load the canoe, we must make sure that the canoe's fragile bottom is not damaged on shore rocks. If one of our canoes were to be damaged, our journey would stop until we made repairs. One of the voyageurs holds the canoe out in the river, waist-deep, while the other voyageurs carry the cargo from the shore to the canoe. We are all very careful not to slip or fall on the slippery riverbed rocks. Our loads weigh about 97 kg. (200 pounds), so one slip of the foot could cause a man to fall in to the current and be swept away. If we drop any supplies in the fast-moving river, we face starvation on our journey. If anyone becomes sick or injured, our journey will be delayed.

The days are hard. Can you imagine having to unload and reload a canoe many times in the day? Sometimes we have to reload our canoes ninety times on one leg of our journey! That does not include our nightly stops. We also cannot travel on stormy days because the danger on the rivers and lakes is too great. We certainly earn our wages.



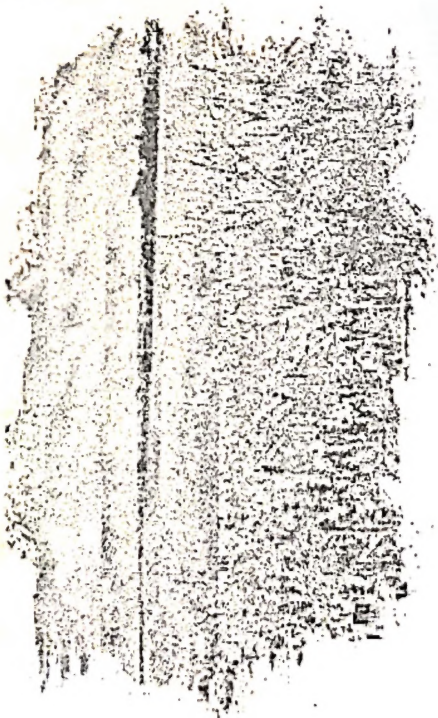
When the river is very rough, we must empty the canoes and carry them along the river bank. We also must carry our canoes and cargo from one waterway to the next. This is called portaging. We turn the canoe upside-down and carry it on our shoulders. Real teamwork is needed to carry the canoe over the uneven ground. We must watch for rocks in our path and low tree branches just above our heads. Some of the canoes weigh 350 kg. (770 lbs), and if those fall onto the ground, we might have to stop and repair the canoe.

Once we have the boat to where it will go in the water again, we return for the cargo. I use my *ceinture fléchée* to support my bundle. Our brigade has to carry about 1360 kg. (3000 lbs) of cargo. A pack weighs about 40 kg (88 lbs). We voyageurs carry at least two packs. It takes quite a few trips before all of the cargo has been moved on the portage. Sadly, I have lost friends who have fallen into the rushing waters while on a portage. The weight of their packs prevented them from saving themselves from the strong current and hidden rocks.

Each breakfast is the same as last night's supper. Because there is no such thing as refrigeration, our food needs to be preserved in traditional methods. From Montreal to the Grand Portage, we eat salt pork. Pork meat is boiled and covered with salt before it is put into barrels. This method of preservation keeps the meat from going bad. If the meat spoiled, we could get very sick. If we eat dried peas or beans, and some hard tack or bannock with our salt pork, we have very nutritious meals. We eat so much salt pork that soon, we are sick of it! As we meet native peoples on our journey, we try to trade for fresh meat, corn, pumpkins, potatoes, local fruits, and berries.

At Grand Portage, we will trade with the native women for maize mush. It is corn mush slathered with bear grease to keep it from going bad. We think it is very tasty with fresh berries.

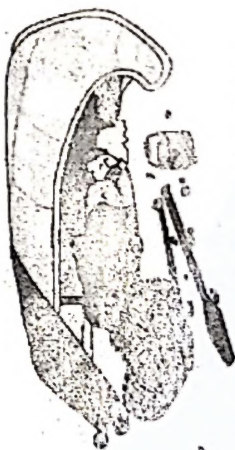
When we start to cross the prairies, we will trade with the natives for pemmican. It is very good to take on long journeys. It will last for a very long time. Pemmican is made from dried and pounded buffalo meat mixed with buffalo fat.



Sometimes there are dried saskatoon berries in the pemmican. The pemmican is packed into 40 kg (88 lb.) buffalo hide bags and will keep for months.

At the end of a long day, it is time to set up our camp. The first thing we do is remove the cargo and make sure that the canoe is undamaged. We enjoy our supper beside a hot fire talking about our families and singing songs to help lighten our spirits. To sleep, we curl up under our canoes. We need to be rested before we can face the next hard day.

Life on the rivers is challenging and the journeys are difficult and long. We always look forward to finally arriving at our rendezvous point and joining in the festivities that are shared there. We gather with First Nations people, *coureurs de bois*, other voyageurs, and tradesmen to celebrate life and have some real fun. Stories and songs are shared, much food and drink consumed, and competitions waged comparing bravery and strength. It is here that people of many races and nationalities unite, ever respectful of the challenges and accomplishments demanded by this wild new frontier.



A Day in the Life of a Voyageur

Name _____

Date _____

Read both pages of *A Day in the Life of a Voyageur*, and then complete the following chart to compare a day in your life with that of a voyageur.

	Me	Typical Voyageur
Age		
Wake up time		
Breakfast food		
Dinner food		
Weight carried during the day		
Dangerous situations		
Sleeping accommodations		
"Wardrobe" (clothing)		
Income (money earned)		
Entertainment		